

Case Assails U.S. Financing Of Thais in Laos

By Murrey Marder
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Sen. Clifford P. Case (R-N.J.) charged yesterday that there is "glaring inconsistency" in the Nixon administration's explanations of U.S. financing of Thai troops in Laos.

Case said he believes that the administration is violating legislation which "forbids the use of Department of Defense money for funding foreign mercenaries in Laos."

The State and Defense departments disagreed. They said the 1970 legislation cited by Case would bar the transfer by Thailand of U.S.-supplied military assistance to another country. But in the case of Laos, the departments claimed, the legislation permitted the use of Defense Department funds for "Thai volunteers who are operating in irregular guerrilla units in Laos under the command of the Royal Lao Armed Forces."

Case recalled yesterday that he stated on May 20 that he had learned "from Government sources that there are four to six thousand Thai troops in Laos and the U.S. Government — through the CIA — is paying for them."

"I stand by that statement," Case said yesterday, and "I am glad we now have a better idea of where the money is coming from."

Case claimed that new information supplied to him "directly contradicts testimony given by Secretary of Defense [Melvin R.] Laird on June 14 before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee."

State and Defense countered yesterday that there is "no inconsistency."

This was the latest in a series of disputes during the Indochina war in which congressmen expressed the belief that one avenue of funds had been blocked off, only to find that funds had been drawn from another category. In this case, the distinction drawn by the administration was between the use of the regular overseas Military Assistance Program (MAP) and funds drawn from the Defense Department budget, called "Military Assistance, Service Funded" (MASF).

Case produced a letter yesterday from David M. Abshire, Assistant Secretary of State for Congressional Relations, dated July 15. It said:

"Support for these [Thai] irregulars is supplied under

the Lao military aid program which, as you know, is funded through the Department of Defense budget at 'Military Assistance, Service Funded' (MASF)."

Case contended that this statement conflicts with Laird's responses to his questions on June 14. He asked Laird then if the "Military Assistance Program" would be used "for regular or irregular Thai troops in Laos," or if that financing "comes from somewhere else." Laird replied, "That is correct. The Military Assistance Program will not fund that program." Laird later repeated the disclaimer.

Senate sources yesterday said that in another exchange, Case asked: "Would the funding for Thai troops in Laos fall under the international security program." Laird responded: "There is no program in our department which finances such a program." But in the transcript as amended by the Defense Department, these sources said, Laird's answer was changed to state: "There is no such program in our Department's request for international security assistance."

When asked for explanation of that change, a Defense Department spokesman yesterday said that the subject of Laird's public testimony was "the international security assistance program."

Laird's comments, "at that point in the lengthy hearings," the spokesman continued, "were in the context of MAP not MASF." It is "normal practice, the spokesman continued, for the Committee and the Department each to make their own corrections in 'the unofficial draft transcript . . . for accuracy and clarity.' Congress 'is, of course, fully aware of the MASF program,' said the spokesman, and Laird's remarks were 'reviewed' to assure that they were 'understood' in the proper context."

A State Department spokesman said that Congress, in 1966, set up the MASF program for use of Defense Department funds for Laos, Thailand and Vietnam.

Case said yesterday that "the fundamental issue remains of the public's and the Congress' right to know what is happening in the 'secret war' in Laos."

U.S. Defends Funding of Thais in Laos

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The Nixon administration has denied charges by Sen. Clifford P. Case, R-N.J., that it has violated Congressional restrictions by financing Thai irregulars fighting in Laos.

State Department spokesman Charles W. Bray III said yesterday that these volunteers from Thailand, operating on their own under Laos command, do not fall under the amendment of Sen. J. William Fulbright, D-Ark., to the Defense Appropriation Act last year.

According to that amendment, Bray said, the U.S. government is prohibited from using any of the \$2.5 billion for Vietnam to support other "free world forces" aiding the local governments of Laos and Cambodia.

"We have taken the position in the executive branch," said Bray of the Fulbright amendment, "that these free world forces would be formally organized units provided by other governments and under the command of nationals of those governments."

"Not Regular Forces"

Such is not the case for the Thai volunteers in Laos, Bray said. "They are not from the regular forces of Thailand, and they are under Lao command in Laos." Case had earlier estimated their number at between 4,000 and 6,000, but state department officials said that number is "slightly high."

Both Fulbright and Case insist that the amendment is intended to prevent the use of mercenaries.

Bray also denied Case's charge on the floor of the Senate yesterday that the funds to support these Thai volunteers come out of the budget of the Central Intelligence Agency. He stood behind a letter sent by the department to Case July 15—and released yesterday—that support goes through the Lao military program funded by the Defense Department.

But other officials admitted that the actual mechanics of transmitting the funds to the Thais, most of whom are fighting in North Laos around the Plain of Jars, may be worked

out by the CIA—who advise the local Lao forces there.

Case's statement yesterday accused the administration of a "glaring inconsistency" in its position on "funding Thai troops in Laos." He noted the contradiction between what the July 15 letter from the state department said and a statement by Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird June 14, before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Case quoted Laird as saying, in answer to a direct question by Case, that the senator was

"correct" about funds for the volunteers coming from "somewhere else" — "The military assistance program will not fund that program," Laird said.

Yet the July 15 letter to Case stated that "support for these irregulars is supplied under the Lao military aid program which, as you know, is funding through the Department of Defense budget as 'Military Assistance, Service-Funded (MASF)'."

Bray said he could not explain the "confusion" over what Laird had told the Foreign Relations

Committee. Both he and Case noted, however, that Laird's words were technically correct, since the name, "military assistance program" as such has been eliminated from Laos — as well as Thailand and South Vietnam.

In 1966 Congress bowed to the request of the Johnson administration and included military aid to those three countries in the regular Defense Department budget. So the "military assistance program" formerly controlled by the State Department in Laos has become the defense

department's "Military Assistance, Service-Funded" program. Laird did not emphasize this point to the Foreign Relations Committee in assuring Case that no funding would go through the extinct "Military Assistance Program."

Case yesterday also asked that the administration provide a White Paper on all the details of Laos. He said the taxpayer has a right to know what is being done with the \$350 million a year the administration has admitted spending there. Bray said no

such White Paper is being prepared. But administration officials said that much of the information may soon emerge in several transcripts of a Senate hearing and report now being cleared for publication by the administration.